

Spring 2006

Going Home

“I expect you’re counting the days till you return to the UK”, a Ukrainian colleague remarked to me a few weeks ago. “Why, yes...of course I am”, I replied, hesitantly.

Part of that lack of conviction was Time’s moving chariot that was closer behind than I’d realized. And, to mix my poets, to move on from “Oh to be in England, now that April’s there” to “summer be a-commin in...”? Was it only six weeks before I’d be leaving behind all those noisy students, so annoying in the classroom but so charming outside it, whose names I was just beginning to get right? And only six weeks to make travel arrangements, to clear up my domestic arrangements this end, and activate those for the UK.? Blunt answer, yes.

And blunt answers, like “Zakritt”, “Remont” and especially “Het”, will be amongst the things here I’ll be glad to leave behind, along with all those other negative attributes we Westerners like to ascribe to our Ukrainian hosts. No more concerted glares from staff in shops or restaurants you’ve presumed to enter. No more casual comments from administrators “By the way, it’s a public holiday next Tuesday; I hope you’ve made alternative arrangements with your class”. No more frustrations at getting on a marsuka that isn’t going where all the signs say it is going. No more implications of insult when I attempt to use the safety belts in a cab, and hoping that when I say “Schumaker” the driver will take it as a compliment. No more threats to inner peace when walking on the sidewalk, whether from jostling youth, arrogant black-glassed SUPs, or public authorities that allow down-pipes from roofs – even on a prestigious building like the National Opera -- to drain over the pavements, making them ice-rinks in winter, and torrents in spring.

But, if my enthusiasm for going home is qualified, perhaps it’s because things in the West ain’t so great as we crack them up to be? I start to remember that “customer service” is not all that wonderful in the UK. Like the time I was told by a car-hire clerk at Stansted “What happens your side of the counter is your problem”. Like being told in one pub “Can’t eat yet, it’s too early”, the next “ Can’t eat now, you’re too late”, and in the third “Limited menu – staff holidays” (all these in summer, in an exquisite riverside town). And everywhere, expense, expense, expense ... Yes, London’s first mayor (as opposed to Lord Mayor, but that’s another story), for all his personal idiosyncrasies, has done a great job in getting people out of their cars and onto public transport. But inevitably this has shored up the most flagrant of London’s monopolies – the famous or should it be infamous black taxi. Now no gimmicks are needed to start a broad-ranging conversation with a London cabbie, because he has to use the meter but doesn’t want you to watch it. Not until the journey’s end, when you grit your teeth, pay up, and the conversation comes to an abrupt end because you haven’t tipped enough.